

# Baba Bling The Peranakans and Their Jewellery

By Adrienne Lotoski

*Baba Bling: The Peranakans and Their Jewellery*, at the Peranakan Museum (TPM) now until mid-December, focuses on the wearable valuables of that unique culture born of Chinese/Malay marriages in Penang, Malacca and Singapore. Some of the oldest jewels date back to the early 19th century, while others are far more contemporary. Some were borrowed, some were found and a few were even dug out of the ground, according to Randall Ee, the exhibition's curator.

Mr Ee, who is himself a Peranakan, spent much of the last year contacting Peranakan families and private collectors throughout Asia in search of quality heirloom pieces and exquisitely crafted period jewellery. He even borrowed some of his own family's treasures for the exhibition. "*Baba Bling* was a topic of dinner conversation for many months among my family members," said Mr Ee. The resulting temporary gathering of one-of-a-kind treasures will be displayed thematically in two of the TPM's galleries, along with pieces from the permanent collections of the TPM and the Asian Civilisations Museum. Accompanying anecdotes about the jewellery's owners provide additional insight.

"*Baba Bling* is a wonderful way for TPM to celebrate its one-year anniversary," said Mr Ee. "We knew TPM would be popular, but the response has been wonderfully overwhelming, with more than 75% of museum visitors being Singaporean [in the initial months after opening]," he says. "Many people of Peranakan heritage who haven't been to museums before are coming to visit. They are really proud to be Peranakan again."

It's been 18 years since such a wide range of Peranakan treasures has been shown in Singapore. That last exhibition, *Gilding the Phoenix: The Straits Chinese and Their Jewellery*, held at the National Museum, was curated by Edmond Chin. A Hong Kong jewellery designer and collector, Edmond Chin contributed some of his personal pieces to *Baba Bling* as well.

The exhibition's title is perhaps as glitzy as its collection. A 'Baba' is a descendant of the Peranakan Chinese in Malaysia and Singapore and is also used as a term of honour when referring to Peranakan men in general. (The general term for Peranakan women is *Nonyas*). 'Bling' is an American hip-hop pop-culture term that refers to flashy or elaborate



Silver and pearl hairpin, early 20th c., Malacca

jewellery. It seems both appropriate and amusing to fuse these varied cultural terms to describe items of mixed culture origins. And, of course, it's a very

eye-catching (and ear-pleasing) phrase.

By the late 19th century, many Peranakan merchants had seen huge increases in personal fortunes, and they wore their jewellery as a way of displaying their wealth and influence.

"Jewellery tells the story of the community and what happened to the community," Randall Ee explained. Like the Victorians of the same era, the Peranakans expressed the fullness and richness of their lives through a degree of personal flamboyance.

Believing that 'more was more', Peranakan women adorned themselves from head to foot with lavishly crafted jewels, heavy with gold relief and minute gold repousse (designs hammered into the metal). There was jewellery for daily wear as well as for important social occasions. Small pieces evolved into large and ornate accessories. The love affair with jewellery was keen: *Nonyas* loved owning it – lots of it – and they enjoyed wearing it – lots of it. They preferred diamonds, but emeralds, sapphires and pearls were also popular.

"The wealthier and more powerful the family, the larger the diamonds," explained Mr Ee, who has studied gemology and jewellery design – training that served him well as he curated this exhibition. "There are tales of families with biscuit trays filled with diamonds," he added. Families that didn't own jewellery – or that didn't own enough jewellery or own large enough diamonds – resorted to renting or borrowing it for special occasions such as the elaborate 12-day Peranakan wedding ceremony.

The 'stars' of the exhibition are undoubtedly the gold *kerosangs*. The quintessential Peranakan brooch, the *kerosang* was worn in sets of three or five to secure a woman's colourful *kebaya* (traditional Peranakan blouse). Simple *kerosang* were circular pins. More ornate ones were in the shapes of paisleys, stars or mythical animals and some were even designed so they could be taken apart and worn separately as pins or a necklace. Auspicious symbols of good fortune, fertility or long-life were common.



Curator Randall Ee  
Photo by Susanne Paulli



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*Kerosang* design evolved as craftsmen learned new ways to cut and set diamonds. These jewellers were often asked to ply their craft while seated on the owner's porch to ensure that cherished gems were not exchanged for inferior ones. Goldsmith tools and moulds will also be on display at the exhibition.

Randall Ee hopes that this exhibition may be a good starting point for a book documenting the family histories of some of the Peranakans he met during his research. "I uncovered many personal and interesting stories about families, as well as mysteries. Sometimes no one knew why pieces of a set were missing and other times there were stories about it that were not told or histories that remained unsaid." So Peranakan jewellery now, gold nuggets of family history later.

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**Adrienne Lotoski** joined FOM in 2006 and is a docent at the ACM and the Peranakan Museum. She is on the FOM Council and has worked on several FOM training teams including the Foundation Training team and the ACM Training Team.

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Photos courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum, unless noted



Silver and mother-of-pearl belt, early 20th c., Penang, on loan from Dr Ho Pui Sun, Collection of Ms Quah Quee Tin



Gold and diamond ring, early 20th c., Singapore, Gift of Edmond Chin



Exhibition Research Team: Maddie Tham, Gwen Ong, Sylvia Peh, OiLeng Chua-Gumpert, Yvonne Khoo, Fiona Mutch, Constance Ong  
Photo by OiLeng Chua-Gumpert

### Tours

FOM Docents will provide highlights of the exhibition during the regularly scheduled weekday 2:00 pm tour, and one-hour tours at 12:30 pm on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

### Brilliant Baba Bling Lectures

**Mad about Motifs: Facets, Florals & Filigree**  
Randall Ee, Curator, Peranakan Museum  
16 July | 7:30 pm

**New Thinking about Peranakan Jewellery**  
Edmond Chin, Author of *Gilding the Phoenix*  
17 September | 7:30 pm

### Curator's Tours

Be part of a special after-hours tour of *Baba Bling* led by curator Randall Ee. \$30 per person. Limited spaces available.  
13 August & 19 November | 7:30 pm

### Children's Workshop

#### Treasure Trove

For children ages 7-10. \$25 per person. Limited spaces available.  
1 August | 2:00 pm – 4:00 pm

For more information, visit [www.peranakanmuseum.sg](http://www.peranakanmuseum.sg)